

Katrina Volunteer Aids Communications Effort

Mike Heideman, communications specialist with the KDHE Office of Communications, recently returned from Hancock County, Miss. after assisting in recovery efforts for Hurricane Katrina.

He volunteered and was deployed as part of an incident management team through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), a multi-state agreement in which Kansas participates. Mike served as a public information officer within the Hancock County emergency operations center (EOC) throughout the first half of November.

"I received a phone call on a Friday afternoon and was on my way to Mississippi that Saturday morning," remarked Mike.

Because many residents were cut off from the media, local officials at first were not able to communicate essential information to them. To address this, Mike and the other public information officers took a low-tech approach.



A devastated residential neighborhood in Pass Christian, Miss.

"We were responsible for working with the media and publishing daily fliers. We delivered the fliers to various relief sites around Hancock County," Mike said. "This gave us the chance to talk face-to-face with people, get a sense of their concerns, and pass them along to people in charge."

The fliers contained information on local current events and public meetings, the locations of emergency sites, ways for people to contact officials, as well as information on the progress of recovery efforts.

Hancock County is a suburban county in the southwest corner of Mississippi. The Louisiana/Mississippi state line serves as the county's western border; the coast of the Gulf of Mexico lies to the south.

The strongest part of Katrina's eyewall smashed into the Mississippi coast on Aug. 29, 2005. A record storm surge reaching 34-feet completely submerged many homes and businesses. Severe flooding occurred in places as far as five miles from the coast. Tornadoes and hurricane-force winds ravaged the county for nearly 14 straight hours.

According to the Wikipedia Web site, the U.S. land area covered by federal disaster declarations in response to Katrina is about 90,000 square miles – an area nearly as large as the United Kingdom.

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In Hancock County, only one small county government building survived. All others were destroyed or rendered useless. The community's 64-bed regional medical center was closed, and re-opened weeks later with just 25 emergency-only beds.

Heideman says he will never forget his experiences or the people of Hancock County.

"The destruction was unbelievable, but I did notice after two weeks that the area looked just a little bit better from when I arrived. In a few years, I plan to go back to see how much more they've recovered."



These buildings are located across from the beach on U.S. 90 near Waveland, Miss. Flooding has completely destroyed the bottom two floors.

For more information about Katrina, visit [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane Katrina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina).